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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 2, 1987

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
WHITE HOUSE CHIEF OF STAFF
HOWARD H. BAKER

The Press Briefing Room

4:32 P.M. EST

SENATOR BAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make my first and maiden appearance before this group. I intend to do this often, and I intend to do it when circumstances warrant. Let me first say that it's been an exciting day for Howard Baker. The first day of any job is always challenging, but the first day as Chief of Staff for the President of the United States is absolutely extraordinary. I thought I was busy in the Senate, and indeed I was. But this is really a remarkable new experience. It has been very busy, indeed.

I've been with the President off and on all day in a series of meetings beginning this morning at 9:00 a.m. on a variety of subjects. And let me say to begin with that I've known Ronald Reagan since 1966, and I worked with him almost every day while I was Majority Leader from 1981 until I left the Senate in 1985. And I've never seen Ronald Reagan more energetic, more fully engaged, and more in command of difficult circumstances and questions that we were dealing with throughout this day. He's never been better. And I have seen him up close on many occasions, and I say that from firsthand observation.

As I say, a number of things were dealt with today in the Oval Office and in meetings throughout the day, and I will touch on two of those now. First, I'd like to announce on behalf of the President that on Wednesday, March 4th at 9:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time the President will address the nation. The address is available for live television and radio coverage.

I might also say that we have handed out now, or will shortly hand out a copy of a letter to the President of the United States from Bob Gates, Robert M. Gates, who is the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence and the Acting Director of Central Intelligence and I will read that to you. It's dated today:

"Dear Mr. President, it is apparent that there is strong sentiment in the Senate to await completion at minimum of the work of the Senate Select Committee on Iran before acting on my nomination. I believe a prolonged period of uncertainty would be harmful to the Central Intelligence Agency, the intelligence community, and potentially to our national security. Accordingly, I respectfully request that you withdraw my nomination to be Director of Central Intelligence. I am deeply honored that you chose me for this high position, and I pledge my full support and assistance to whomever you select and the Senate confirms as the next Director."

Bob Gates came up this morning and advised me of his intention in this respect. We arranged a meeting this afternoon at 2:30 p.m. for the President to receive Mr. Gates, which he did. And the President in turn issued this statement, which also will be handed out after this session. The statement is as follows, and it is a statement of the President:

"With great regret, I have agreed to Robert Gates' request that his name be withdrawn as the nominee to be Director of

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Central Intelligence. I met with Bob this afternoon. He asked me to withdraw his nomination rather than to proceed with extended consideration by the Senate. I've asked Bob to continue serving as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence under a new director. And I look forward to working with him during the next two years. He is a remarkably talented and dedicated man who has served five presidents with great professional skill and integrity. I have been impressed with the class he has shown under the enormous pressures of recent weeks. At any other time, I'm certain that he would easily have been confirmed without delay. It is clear that at this point confirmation proceedings would not be in the interest of the CIA or the nation. Mr. Gates has done an outstanding job as acting Director, and he will continue to serve in that capacity until a new director is confirmed.

The President has discussed a number of names to be submitted to the Senate of the United States as the Director of Central Intelligence. No choice has been made by the President as of this moment, however I can assure you that it is an urgent item on the President's agenda and we hope to have a name to submit very soon, indeed.

Q Have you had turn-downs?

SENATOR BAKER: No. Let me back up and say that certain contacts are still underway, and where they mature into acceptance or turn-down, I can't say. But we do not yet have an acceptance.

Q Senator, may I ask you about the President's speech, which is widely believed to be very important to him? A lot of people, including many of his close friends, have said he ought to make some recognition in the speech that his policy was wrong, as the Tower Board has said, and that he bears more than responsibility but has made some mistakes. Do you think he'll do that?

SENATOR BAKER: Sam, I went over a draft of a speech with the President today. And I'm not going to try to beat out the President on what he says Wednesday night. But let me tell you, I think it's a marvelous speech. I think it's going to be a good speech and I think it will have a profound effect on the country's perception of his role as President and his future ability to govern.

Chris?

Q Your predecessor, Donald Regan, got into trouble because some people thought he was getting out in front of the President, perhaps stepping in his spotlight. You have a long career of stating your views, you have good relations with Congress and the press -- are you concerned that you're going to be -- are you going to be another prime minister?

SENATOR BAKER: No, you bet I am not.

Q What do you see as your role?

SENATOR BAKER: I am acutely aware of the fact that Ronald Reagan is President and I am not, and that my role and responsibility is to serve him as his Chief of Staff, to carry out his programs and proposals, and to serve him in whatever capacity I can in that role.

Yes?

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Q Senator, a number of the President's friends have been going public in recent days suggesting that he has to change his management style and perhaps apologize as well when he makes this speech. Number one, has he reacted to that at all, and number two, what do you think about them giving the public advice?

SENATOR BAKER: I think that the advice was heard and understood, and I think the President knows precisely what the sentiment in the Congress and in the Party and in the country is with respect to his management style. I would like to say on my own responsibility, however, that I do not see a hands-off President or I do not see an AWOL President. I see a man who is very much in touch with the issues before this country and that confront his government. So as far as I'm concerned, the relationship today -- and it's just one day -- but the relationship today has been flawless.

Q Well, if I could follow up just for a second, is that since the Tower commission report came out, because they found him to be very much out of touch?

SENATOR BAKER: Yes, well, I think it is clear that during the Iran-Contra situation that there were many, many things that the President did not know and that under better circumstances perhaps he should have known. That is for the President to say. But the President has gone a long way now in restructuring the National Security Council and replacing personnel, and I think many of those objections have already been dealt with.

Q Senator, how do you intend to restructure what is under your responsibility? What do you see yourself doing, and has your mind about what you want to do changed any on this first day?

SENATOR BAKER: No, not really. If I have changed my mind at all, it has been about the difficulty of getting your arms around this mechanism down here. It is a big, big staff operation and enormous responsibilities and a great diverse set of challenges. But what I have done is meet with the present staff this morning at 8:00 a.m. to assure them that there would be no wholesale firings and that as changes were made, they would be done carefully and deliberately and with full consultation with those who are affected.

I put in place a two-man transition team over the weekend, and they will continue -- the transition team will continue to observe the situation and to make recommendations to me on how the staff should be structured and how the names should be filled in when that staff design is obtained.

I will carry these recommendations to the President because I am keenly aware of the fact that it is the President's staff really, and not Howard Baker's staff.

Q When are you going to do that, sir?

SENATOR BAKER: We've set no deadline, but it's not going to be within a week. It will be longer than that.

Q Senator, you dealt with Ronald Reagan for a long time when you were Majority Leader, and one of your closest associates during that period who was in fact your emissary to Ronald Reagan, Paul Laxalt, said the other day that for the first time in his political career Ronald Reagan has got to become a hands-on President. Now I'm wondering whether you think there are changes that need to be made in the way this President approaches his job in the way that Senator Laxalt feels these changes need to be made?

SENATOR BAKER: I have talked to Paul Laxalt today and I understand fully what he is saying.

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I also told that to Paul, my friend Paul Laxalt what I just told you all at the beginning of this meeting. You know, it's been two years now since I've dealt regularly with Ronald Reagan, but I've never seen him better than he's been today.

Q Senator, why do you feel that you have to come here today and reassure us and the country that the President is in charge, is on top of things? Are you concerned about the impression that the criticism from Senator Muskie yesterday that he was appalled, as were other Tower commissioners, at the lack of alertness? And are you concerned about the criticism that perhaps Nancy Reagan is more in control than her husband is?

SENATOR BAKER: Two parts to that. The first part is, I felt I owed an obligation to you to come today on the first day.

Q I mean in terms of defending the President.

SENATOR BAKER: And the second -- yes, and the second part is, I opened the remarks by making these observations because they're true. And I felt they are center -- uppermost in many people's minds. Is this President fully in control of his Presidency? Is he alert? Is he fully engaged? Is he in contact with the problems? And I'm telling you, it's just one day's experience and maybe that's not enough, but today he was superb.

Q And Mrs. Reagan, the issue of Mrs. Reagan's involvement in West Wing decisions?

SENATOR BAKER: I haven't talked to Mrs. Reagan today. I intend to do that later today. (Laughter.)

Q You'd better answer that phone, Senator.

Q Take the call.

Q Talk as long as necessary.

SENATOR BAKER: I intend to do that later today. But let me say, I've known Nancy Reagan a long time, too, and I did speak to her on Friday, and I expect -- there's the phone now. (Laughter.)

Q Why are you talking --

Q In a draft of the speech that you've seen, you described as tremendous, and you believe the President today at least was superb. What else do you think the President needs to do after the speech to try to reclaim the political momentum of the country?

SENATOR BAKER: I think a number of things, and I will tell you very frankly that I will consult with the President's friends and advisers, and I will help you, if you will permit me to, to devise a strategy to get across to the country the perception of Ronald Reagan today that I saw today.

Q Well, to follow that up, part of his problem remains the continuing investigations into, as you once asked, what did the President know and when did he know it, on many of these key issues. How will you be involved as opposed to Mr. Abshire's role in helping to answer some of those questions?

SENATOR BAKER: I'm not sure how we'll be involved. I'm going to try to be in touch with every aspect of White House operations, and I've talked to Dave Abshire today and he has assured me that I'll be kept fully advised of all developments. But let me say, I think that the publication of the Tower commission was a turning point. I think that the President was damaged by some allegations in the Tower commission, but I think it is more important to observe that he survived. And I think he's going to grow from this point, in strength and popularity, and that he will resume his

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role as a very popular and very effective President of the United States.

Q Senator Baker, other national issues have been completely put under the rug since the Iranian affair. What are you planning to do about insider trading and computerized trading by institutional investors which put our country and our economy and the stock market in grave danger?

SENATOR BAKER: That's a good question, and I tell you what I'm going to do. I have a list of things that I'm going to try to be briefed on, and that no doubt will be one of them.

Q Senator, it's all well and good for staff people to come out here and tell us as they have today that the President is energetic. We haven't seen him to answer questions for three months.

SENATOR BAKER: Let me tell you --

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Q Could you tell us when he can answer questions to us and display to us the kind of alertness that you say you --

SENATOR BAKER: And energy? Yes. Let me tell you, I accept blame for him not being here today. The original plan, to be frank with you, was to announce both the Gates' withdrawal and the designation of a new DCI -- and the President was prepared to do that. When it didn't quite come together that way, it was decided that I would come down and do this, but I expect you'll see the President very --

Q When will we see him? When will we see him?

SENATOR BAKER: I expect you'll see the President very soon.

Q Why didn't you want the President in here, Senator?

Q Why did you change the plans?

MR. FITZWATER: Let's take the final question.

SENATOR BAKER: Why didn't I want him today?

Q Why did you change the plans?

SENATOR BAKER: Well, he was willing today. I said, look, we're going to announce only half of this and not the other half so why don't we save and let you do the other one later. And that was the whole thing.

Q Senator Baker --

MR. FITZWATER: Johanna one more and then we'll break.

SENATOR BAKER: All right.

Q Senator Baker, you were quoted in the Miami Herald yesterday as saying that the President has a half-life memory and that the First Lady, when she gets her hackles up, can be a dragon. Do you stand by those comments?

SENATOR BAKER: Sure. What I said was this -- in my experience, as Majority Leader, I found that the President was as good as anybody in the give-and-take discussion on sensitive, important and complex issues. But that, when you approached him about it two weeks or two months later, you found that the half-life of that memory was short. But so is mine, and so is yours, I suspect -- that if you're up on a particular issue, that's one thing, but you try to come back to it cold in the few weeks, and it isn't quite the same. That's what I meant.

Q Senator Baker?

Q And the First Lady?

SENATOR BAKER: The First Lady is a distinguished citizen of this nation. She's a great lady and she obviously is a lady of strong convictions. That's what I meant.

Q Well, what are you going to talk to her about when you talk to her today?

SENATOR BAKER: Whatever she wants to talk about. (laughter.)

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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4:48 P.M. EST